

Effective Ministry When Health Issues Threaten: Four Suggestions

By Bob Young

The question came from a sister in Christ: “How does one offer encouragement and spiritual advice to family and friends who become ill or suffer from health issues? Can you suggest a basis from which to work?” Following are four suggestions.

Listen. What is the family member or friend experiencing, feeling? What are the concerns? Each person has different concerns, and addressing those concerns requires listening. Some of the concerns may have little connection with the illness, but removing perceived stressors can be a major factor in the improving health of the patient. Rather than immediately jumping to “wellness” issues, listen to learn what the underlying concerns are at the present moment. Listen to empathize with the other person.

Focus on spiritual implications and concerns—avoid too much focus on the health issue. When physical ill-health is present, the greater concern to be reflected in prayers, conversation, and encouragement is that such events are a normal part of life in this fallen world. The primary concern is that such physical concerns not diminish or destroy our spiritual faith. Often we pray for physical healing, or use the ambiguous and ever-present “be with” phrase rather than addressing the real concern which is that experiences in ill-health not discourage spiritual vitality.

In general, **avoid sharing parallels and personal experiences** with others who have had health problems. Most of us have heard the story of the hospital visitor who observed that his Aunt Millie died of the very thing for which the hospital patient is being treated. Even when we avoid such blatant missteps, it is easy to set up false expectations or hopes by citing perceived parallels which may not be all that similar. This is not an absolute rule, and some patients may be encouraged by knowing of others who had the same or a similar problem and recovered easily and completely. Careful listening will help us correlate our intervention to the needs of the moment.

Take it personally. Get involved to an appropriate level. Try to understand what you can do to relieve the stresses and concerns. What concerns does the friend or family have that you could handle, or at least ease? Sometimes the smallest of matters can be helpful, especially when the patient is hospitalized or incapacitated and has no one else to look into the concern.